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ABSTRACT

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Youth Summits: Law-Related Education for Violence Prevention

By Hannah Leiterman

The youth summit, which engages adolescent students, public officials, and lawyers in discourse and deliberation about critical social problems and legal issues, is becoming a popular method of law-related education. This Digest discusses (1) the youth summit concept in law-related education, (2) examples of youth summits across the United States, (3) support for youth summits by organizations of lawyers and educators, (4) best practices for youth summits, and (5) resources for youth summits.

The Youth Summit Concept in Law-Related Education. Youth summits are an important part of law-related education, especially as they address violence prevention. Youth summits bring together students from diverse backgrounds and ask them to work with adults to confront social problems and issues that affect them. Participants have a chance to present their ideas and opinions to policymakers. Thus they can influence law and government through resolution of public issues. By involving young people in solving the problem of youth violence rather than imposing a "treatment" on them, youth summits have a positive impact on young people's behavior as responsible citizens. Youth summits also offer opportunities for participants to learn new skills and knowledge, and instill in young people a sense of responsibility for developing and participating in solutions to the challenges facing their communities.

The models used in many states include pre-summit activities for students and/or teachers, such as law-related education lessons, surveys, background research, and assignments focusing on youth violence. During many summits students develop "action plans" to prevent violence in their schools and communities. Follow-up summit activities include service learning projects, school-based summits, and reports. Youth summits bring diverse experts and speakers from a variety of backgrounds, including police chiefs, juvenile justice officials, college and university professors, members of Congress, lawyers, judges from various courts including the state supreme court, television personalities, and many others.

Youth Summits Across the United States. The U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Youth for Justice Program has been promoting youth summits since 1995. A variety of models are used, varying in size from fewer than 50 students to over a thousand. Summits take place in a variety of venues, from school auditoriums and state courthouses, to churches and local TV stations. They cover a plethora of topics important to young people, such as substance abuse and gun safety.

Some summits modify the standard youth summit model to attract special audiences. A "Girls' Summit" in Florida, sponsored by the American Association of University Women, addressed summit topics of importance to young women, such as teen pregnancy and date rape. Other summits go beyond state borders to bring together even wider audiences. An online "Junior Summit," hosted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, involved students ages 10-16 from around the globe, discussing, in a variety of languages, projects that addressed important world problems.

A National Online Youth Summit conducted in 1999-2000 by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education brought together 1500 high school students from 26 states in "virtual communities" to discuss timely legal and public policy topics of special interest to young people, such as the death penalty and toxic waste disposal. The summit's culminating activity allowed students to "chat" with the lawyers who had argued the case in question before the Supreme Court, as well as other legal experts.

Support by Lawyers and Educators. The Wyoming Youth Summit is a striking example of what can be accomplished through the collaboration of bar associations, law-related education programs, and students. The Wyoming Bar Association and Foundation have cooperated with the Wyoming LRE Council to develop highly effective youth summits that provide students in Wyoming with opportunities to meet one another and explore ways to prevent violence. In the course of the 1995 Summit, for example, the 75 students attending decided that Wyoming should pass legislation to create teen courts. The students visited the state capital to make presentations in support of teen courts to House and Senate Judiciary hearings. Their lobbying was a success; teen court legislation passed in 1996. Subsequently, the state bar association and the Wyoming LRE Council cooperated to create teen courts in four Wyoming cities. The resources of the Wyoming Bar Association allowed the LRE Council to develop a youth summit that will have lasting impact on the students involved, as well as young people throughout the state—the future beneficiaries of the teen courts created by the summit.

With a grant from the Lincoln National Corporation in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the Young Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association partnered with local organizations to create "Youth Empowerment Summits" for middle and high school students in 22 cities. One such summit occurred in Fort Wayne, Indiana in May 1998. A planning committee of six public school students and two Catholic school students developed a format in which adult leaders planned the logistical aspects of the summit, while the students selected the topics. Three topics were chosen: teachers' strikes, diversity, and "dangerous choices." The Young Lawyers invited a diverse group of 170 seventh and eighth graders from public schools and Catholic schools in Allen County, Indiana to attend.

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They developed a program using the Youth for Justice *Youth Summit Planning Guide*. One session featured a television talk show format with a panel of teachers, two student moderators, and the superintendent of the local school district, who discussed a teachers' work slowdown and contract negotiations. In other sessions, students presented skits on party/drinking scenarios, and local hospital resource people discussed statistics on teen pregnancy and gun violence. The summit was so successful that the schools involved in this event expected it be conducted annually.

Best Practices for Youth Summits. Successful youth summits involve the students in some aspect of development: using their advice and opinions by surveying them in advance, including them in planning on an advisory board, or covering topics of their choosing. Student involvement during the summit—debating, role-playing, discussing, etc.—is also important. Students retain knowledge and skills better when they learn actively, and they show greater dedication to achieving the goals of the summit when they assume responsibility for developing those goals.

In summary, the most effective practices for youth summits are:

- involving students in the planning process
- active learning of knowledge and skills
- examining topics relevant to young peoples' lives
- involving community members from legislatures, social service agencies, and the legal profession

Resources for Youth Summits. The following resources are recommended to organizers and participants in youth summits:

- **American Bar Association Division for Public Education – Youth Summits:** Includes information on youth summits and in-depth profiles of youth summits around the U.S., as well as youth summit links and resources. Also, the directory of LRE programs at <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/lre/main.html> includes links to the Web site of every state program that offers youth summits. For more information about youth summits, or to order a copy of *Technical Assistance Bulletin No. 18: Youth Summits: Engaging Young People in Violence Prevention*, call (312) 988-5735, or send an e-mail to <publiced@staff.abanet.org>.

- **The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago:** <http://www.crfc.org/> Includes the *Youth Summit Planning Guide* in downloadable format; curricula; student guides; a survey; information, graphs, and statistics on past summits; and links to other law-related education and issues-related Web sites (e.g., guns, date rape, hate crimes); call (312) 663-9057.

- **Minnesota Center for Community Legal Education:** <http://www.ccle.fourh.umn.edu> Information and pictures from past summits, links to the text of the legislation future summits will explore, and links to summit speakers and sponsors.

- **National Online Youth Summit:** <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/youth/youth99.html> The American Bar Association Division for Public Education's innovative new national youth summit is profiled here, along with background materials and teaching activities for various summit topics.

- **21st Century Schoolhouse Biennial Summits:** <http://www.viser.net/~gs21/biennial.htm> Features extensive information on the organization's 1997 summit, including a detailed agenda, opening remarks, participants' work, and photographs from the international delegations; information on the 1999 summit; and information about the organization.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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